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It's only a paper moon: a reading of flannery o'connor's "the artifical nigger"

John E. Hahn
Lehigh University

IT'S ONLY A PAPER MOON: A READING OF FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S "THE ARTIFICIAL NIGGER"

by
John E. Hahn

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Jack D. Kelly
Professor in Charge

Albert E. Hartung
Chairman of Department

I would like to aeknowledge the energy, patience, and enthusiasm of three people who helped enormously with this effort, and to dedicate this thesis to Lynn, to Chuck, and especially to Jack.

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It's only a paper moon,
hanging over a cardboard sea.
But it wouldn't be make-believe,
if you believed in me.

It's a Barnum and Bailey world,
just as phoney as it can be.
But it wouldn't be make-believe,
if you believed in me.

Arlen, Rose and Harberg

ABSTRACT

This thesis presents a close reading of Flannery O'Connor's short story "The Artifieial Nigger." I have attempted to demonstrate that the redemption which is claimed for the major character, Mr. Head, is ironic and, therefore, false. The story provides a unique reading experience due to the subtlety with which O'Connor uses her narrator. The reader is forced to test the information he receives from the narrator by comparing it to his own perception of dialogue and action. By controlling the reader's perception of Head in the opening and closing sections, O'Connor duplicates for the reader the experience of Head's grandson, whose perceptions are similarly controlled by Head. In this way, O'Connor forces the reader to participate in the story to an unusual degree, and in a way which is closely analogous to the action of the story. The effect of this participation is to make the reader more fully aware of the irony involved in the story's conclusion. But that effect can only be felt fully by a reader who has followed the action with exceptional care since O'Connor refuses to comment directly on the conclusion and speaks, at that point, only through the unreliable narrator. If the narrator's unreliability has not been perceived in the opening paragraphs, the reader has no way of testing the "redemption" which Head claims

for himself. In addition to the examination of the use of the narrator, I have attempted to provide an explanation of O'Connor's use of racism to reveal Head's true sin, his pride. The racism is a manifestation of Head's sense of complete superiority and provides the reader with the means to test Head's description of himself as a perfect guide for the young. O'Connor defines Head's sinfulness as she describes the way in which his racism is transmitted to his grandson. Also, the racism becomes an emblem for all of the misinformation which Head supplies Nelson with and it consequently provides the reader with a better understanding of both characters. I have tried to prove that a full understanding of these effects--and of the meaning of the initiation experience they describe--can be attained only by close and constant attention to the text.

INTRODUCTION

Flannery O'Connor's short story "The Artificial Nigger" has not attracted the quantity or the quality of critical response that it seems to deserve. It is a tightly constructed and delicately arranged achievement. O'Connor has loaded it with irony and symbolism, and the finished product provides an excellent pedagogic opportunity for instruction in the art of reading. It is therefore disappointing that more commentators haven't attempted to unravel its mysteries; and it is doubly disappointing that those who have tried seem so completely to have missed the point. This thesis offers a reading of the story which will demonstrate O'Connor's use of point of view to encourage the reader to put himself in the hands of an unreliable guide; just as Nelson must depend on his grandfather for guidance, we are dependent on the omniscient narrator. Both guides try to distort the perception of those they are leading. And it is only through testing their guides' interpretations of reality against reality itself that both Nelson and the reader discover the meaning of the initiation experience.

Unfortunately, previous interpretations will be of little use in supporting my reading. Of the few critics who have actually tangled with the story, I have been unable to find even one who shows a full awareness of O'Connor's purpose. Even those who admire "The Artificial Nigger" seem

much too eager to take the story at face value. Critics who elsewhere praise O'Connor for her highly developed sense of irony are curiously unwilling to allow her an ironic conclusion for the story.

Much of this difficulty may come from the too easy acceptance of what is believed to be the role of the Catholic writer. O'Connor now seems to be trapped by the religion which she found so exciting when she was alive. Once they are aware of her theological concerns, her insistence on a firm set of beliefs, and the susceptibility of some of her work to doctrinaire interpretations, too many critics seem too eager to forget the story itself and to rely on doctrine to see them through. This, of course, does her a great injustice--we are in real danger of losing her art in what we believe to be her religion, and in allowing a superficial understanding of the religion to stand for a deep and unprejudiced analysis of the work itself. "The Artificial Nigger" is not an easy story to interpret--she made it so purposely. But that is no reason to abandon the story and concentrate on what appears to be relevant doctrine instead.

The most startling misreading of the story comes from Carter Martin, whose book The True Country is one of the most extensive treatments of O'Connor's work. Martin seems to have missed not only the ending, with its crucial irony, but the beginning and middle too. How else can we explain his sentimentality toward Head, and his underestimation of the nature and depth of Head's pride? He claims that

Head is one of many O'Connor characters who:

> arrive at their epiphanies from a condition of relative innocence or ignorance, without being guilty of active evil or longstanding spiritual pride. Consequently their illumination is more a coming to knowledge of God's grace than an "entry into the world of guilt and suffering." 1

More specifically, he claims that:

> The principle theme of "The Artificial Nigger" is...the transition of the main characters from innocence into sacramental knowledge; Mr. Head and his grandson, Nelson, whom he has raised from infancy, lose their mild but rivalrous familial pride and enter into a richer, more respectful relationship with each other. The story almost literally objectifies Christ's paradoxical teaching that one must lose his life in order to save it. The two rustic main characters take an excursion to Atlanta, become lost, then alienated from each other, and, in finding their common way out of Atlanta, become reconciled, returning to their true backwoods country with humility and new knowledge of themselves. (emphasis added) 2

As I hope this thesis will demonstrate, there is little, if any, internal evidence in the story to support such a reading. In his eagerness to account for O'Connor's religion, Martin seems willing to distort her art; he is so anxious for "happy" theological endings that he misses the real lesson contained in O'Connor's irony. There is nothing mild, nor anything which might be called familial, about Head's pride. It is a sin, it distorts not only his perception of reality but also his knowledge of himself. Because of his pride he does serious damage to Nelson's perceptions of reality, spirituality, and sensuality. Ultimately his pride leads Head to

such a point that he is unable to truely repent, consequently he loses out on his chance for redemption. There is no real reconciliation, nor any true humility.

I hope to prove that O'Connor has carefully constructed "The Artificial Nigger" to reveal the true depravity of a mind totally controlled by pride. Head allows his pride to distort reality, which cuts him off from a perception of God as He is revealed in the material world and which leads him repeatedly into sin. His conception of himself is not static, indeed it changes from one extreme to the other. He initially conceives of himself as the perfect "spiritual guide" to lead Nelson through his initiation--in his final "confession" he describes himself as the worst sinner in recorded history. But these changes do not represent self-knowledge; neither is an honest self-assessment. His pride demands nothing but the most from whatever category he puts himself in, and it stops him from attaining a true perception of himself, of his actual sin, and of the working of God's grace. His final confession is, as will be demonstrated, nothing more than an insurance policy on Paradise; Head is willing to pay the biggest premium--accepting all of the sins of humanity (except his own)--in order to receive the biggest payoff--God loves in proportion as He forgives.

In order to see this all-engulfing pride at work it will be necessary to follow O'Connor's use of irony and

point of view, as mentioned earlier. O'Connor provides us with a highly unreliable narrator in the opening and concluding paragraphs. By juxtaposing this narrator's hyperbole with Head's speech and action, she achieves irony. The difference between what we are told Head will do and what he actually does causes a comic reduction of the spiritual guide which gradually becomes more significant. At the conclusion this ironic perception of Head will provide us with the knowledge that we can not easily accept everything said by either Head or the unreliable narrator, and this should be our cue to scrutinize Head's "redemption" more closely than some of the ctitics apparently have.

Even those critics who have shown a real understanding of the rest of O'Connor's work seem strangely incapable of seeing the irony involved in the story. Stanley Edgar Hyman, for example, who otherwise seems highly competent in assessing O'Connor's irony, claims that:

> Mr. Head has a moment of true repentance and charity, he and the boy are united in love, and the story is over. 3

His lack of attention to the subtle hints which O'Connor uses to alert the reader to the ironic ending is the more perplexing because of the weight he gives to the story in comparison to the rest of her work. He reports that: "'The Artificial Nigger' was Miss O'Connor's own favorite," and concludes: "it makes impressive claims to be considered her best story."[4] I am not personally interested in deciding

whether it is or is not her best story, but certainly someone who wishes to make that claim should be more skeptical than Hyman is when confronted by such a tranquil and neatly packaged conclusion. Especially when written by an author who has made her reputation through her use of irony and the grotesque.

Sister M. Bernetta Quinn shares Hyman's interpretation and is equally anxious for a non-ironic conclusion. In her survey of O'Connor's work she comments on Head's impassioned final scene and compares his previous sin to a more generalized modern problem:

> Contemporary society in recent years has made a business of denying its need of redemption, the advertising agencies being among its chief allies in this endeavor. In "The Artificial Nigger" Flannery O'Connor shows up such blindness in these words: "Mr.Head had never known before what Mercy felt like because he had been too good to deserve any, but he felt he knew now." The old man has undergone a transformation that his grandson, for whom the trip to Atlanta has been arranged, does not share, but which enables Mr. Head to see "that no sin was too monstrous for him to claim as his own," and even, in view of God's incomprehensible Love, to enter Paradise. 5

Sister Bernetta's ability to read only half of the irony to be found in Head's confession may indicate that she is one of those who would force O'Connor into a doctrinal straightjacket and deny her any artistic freedom. Head claims salvation for him self, but by this point in the story we

should know better than to accept anything Head says at face value.

O'Connor uses various images and symbols to guide the reader toward an ironic interpretation. One of the most important is the device which is contained in her use of the "miraculous moonlight." Since the moon is not the source of illumination but merely a reflector of it, moonlight does not give us an accurate perception of reality. In the opening and closing paragraphs she uses moonlight to show us a distorted and ironic perception of Head. The moonlight transforms everything it touches; unlike sunlight, which she says shows us things as they really are, the moonlight shows us things as Head wishes they were. So in the opening paragraph the moonlight transforms his backwood's shack into a palace, and in the closing paragraph it transforms his sin into redemption.

Although he doesn't mention the moonlight, Peter Hays spends more time than most critics in unscrambling the images and symbols in the story. His explication of the allusions to Vergil and Raphael, with whom Head is compared, should have brought him closer to the truth than it did. His initial remarks seem to point directly toward the correct interpretation:

> Mr. Head...is compared with and contrasted to Vergil--who is guide and spiritual tutor to Dante, but learns nothing on the trip himself--and with the angel Raphael

> (God heals)--who is also geographical guide, moral preceptor, and, not unlike Vergil with Dante, the cause of healing the blindness of the elder Tobias (or Tobit). 6

If Hays were to follow out the analogy of Head as Vergil and Raphael, he would find that certain things are just not possible inside that analogy, and certain interpretations of the story (including his own) are therefore not possible so long as that analogy is in force. Vergil, as Hays mentions, learns nothing he didn't already know from leading the innocent Dante through Hell. Raphael also learns nothing from his role as guide to Tobias; God uses him as an agent to open Tobias' eyes to the truth--Raphael himself is unaffected by the process. This would indicate that we can not expect Head to actually achieve knowledge so long as we are comparing him to these figures.

Yet when Hays comes to discuss the story's conclusion, he insists on allowing the analogy to reverse itself. He tra transforms Head from the leader into the led, refers to him as Dante and Tobias, and accepts the assumption of grace as real:

> The story tells of Mr. Head and Nelson's journey from the country to the city and back again, from the darkness of pride to the light of humility: it is indeed a moral mission. And like Dante's and that of Tobias, it is (with use of tthe obvious pun on curing blindness in the later case) a journey of enlightenment. 7

He later makes the reversal of the analogy more elaborate, and ties it more closely to his interpretation. He says of Head's redemption:

> Having humbly learned that he was not a "suitable guide for the young" and having learned, like Dante, to recognize sin, he can aspire to heaven. Like Tobit, through God's Mercy, the scales of blindness have fallen from his eyes. (emphasis added) 8

If Hays had been willing to accept the analogy as an ironic deflation of Head, it would have been unnecessary for him to have to distort the original equation (Vergil/Raphael=Head, Dante/Tobias=Nelson) as he does here.

One of the principle themes of the story is racism, although few critics bother with it much in considering Head as a candidate for paradise. O'Connor uses racism as an emblem for Head's pride, a logical enough analog since it is the expression of his feeling of superiority. His racism is also important in evaluating his ability as a spiritual guide for Nelson, who has never seen a Black before. As we watch Nelson learn racism before he can apply it to anyone, we sense how far Head really is from the inflated description of him in the opening paragraphs. The "artificiality" of the concept of "nigger" is brought home to us when Nelson responds to the black woman with such a desire for maternal affection. Head may have taught him to think as a racist, but he can not completely control the boy's feelings. If all

"niggers" are "artificial" in the sense that there is no such thing existing in reality, it is only an intellectual construct, then Nelson's scene with the black woman is crucial to an understanding of the meaning of racism for the story. Racism represents a distillation of all of the things Head teaches his grandson. The lesson of racism is simply that mankind is split, is not united. When Nelson "learns" to follow Head's racism he is learning that a large portion of humanity is, arbitrarilty, separate and inferior. So long as Nelson believes this he will continue with the repression of his emotional responses toward other people which Head continually demands from him. And until Head confronts his own pride he will not be ready for redemption. Racism is the manifestation of that pride and, as we shall see, there is no indication in his attempted explanation of the statue of the "artificial nigger" that his initiation experience has caused any change in his prejudice.

CHAPTER ONE

The dragon is by the side of the road, watching those who pass. Beware lest he devour you. We go to the Father of souls, but it is necessary to pass by the dragon.

Epigraph to A Good Man Is Hard To Find, from St. Cyril of Jerusalem.

The epigraph Flannery O'Connor prefixed to the collection in which "The Artificial Nigger" was published is an excellent motto to keep in mind as the story is read. St. Cyril's warning, like the story itself, seems obvious -- even self-evident -- on the surface; a closer look, however, reveals some hidden danger. The Saint has not identified the dragon, only warned of his presence. And the chief problem involved in understanding "The Artificial Nigger" is also a perceptual one -- how can the reader be sure that the dragon he sees is the real dragon, and how can he be sure that the dragon has really been dealt with?

O'Connor, as an artist as well as a Christian, was acutely aware of the problems involved in shared perceptions, and also of the necessity for an author to control his reader's perception. Conrad's famous desire to make his readers see was close to her own ambition, and she was particularly -- some say excessively -- fond of grounding her meaning in concrete reality. In her lectures and essays O'Connor reiterated her dictum -- start with the concrete and end there, pin your meanings to it and they will have a solid foundation. In her

words:

> Fiction begins where human knowledge begins -- with the senses -- and every fiction writer is bound by this fundamental aspect of his medium. 1

and:

> The first and most obvious characteristic of fiction is that it deals with reality through what can be seen, heard, smelt, tasted, and touched. 2

Her art as well as her religion taught her the difficulty in relying on too many assumptions about shared perception -- the fiction writer must know what his reader sees, and the best way to know that is to control the reader's perceptions. The writer who wishes to alert the reader to serious problems has the double difficulty of insuring that the reader sees the problem so he can grasp the "solution" the writer offers. In her own words:

> The novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural; and he may well be forced to take ever more violent means to get his vision across to his hostile audience. 3

Such a statement might lead us to suppose that O'Connor's purpose as a writer was merely didactic, and the logical supposition to be drawn from the statement is that her art would grow increasingly simple in order to express her "message" more clearly. Yet she was never ready to sacrifice her art to her message, and her stories grew more complex, not less.

She expressed the rationale for this complexity in an explanation of her use of the grotesque. It will do us well to keep it in mind as we explore the story before us:

> If the writer believes that our life is and will remain essentially mysterious, if he looks upon us as beings existing in a created order to whose laws we freely respond, then what he sees on the surface will be of interest to him only as he can go through it into an experience of mystery itself. His kind of fiction will always be pushing its own limits outward toward the limits of mystery, because, for this kind of writer, the meaning of a story does not begin except at a depth where adequate motivation and adequate psychology and the various determinations have been exhausted. Such a writer will be interested in what we don't understand rather than what we do. He will be interested in possibility rather than probability. He will be interested in characters who are forced out to meet evil and grace and who act on a trust beyond themselves -- whether they know very clearly what it is they act upon or not. 4

This a mind at work on a level of meaning which most readers only visit from time to time. The critics who were surveyed in the introduction seem not to have reached this level at all. Rather, they imposed meaning on the story itself, took the words of the story but missed its meaning. They were reading, but not <u>seeing</u>. If the reader is to avoid following them, he will have to pay much more attention to the story itself, and to the perception which controls it. O'Connor once spoke directly to this point when addressing a class of short story writers:

> (Fiction) must carry its meaning inside it. (This) means that any abstractly expressed compassion or pity or morality in a piece of fiction is only a statement added to it. It means that you can't make an inadequate climatic action complete by putting a statement of meaning on the end of it or in the middle of it or at the beginning of it. It means that when you write fiction you are speaking <u>with</u> character and action, not <u>about</u> character and action. The writer's moral sense must coincide with his dramatic sense. 5

In her effort to push the limits of her fiction outward, to reach the limits of mystery, and to express her response to the distortions she found in reality, O'Connor demanded a level of attention from her readers that they were not always willing to give. In "The Artificial Nigger" she seems to be forcing her reader into a deeper meaning by tricking him -- by purposefully deceiving him with misinformation on the surface and forcing him to dig for the correct information himself. Nowhere is this better demonstrated than on the first page, and it is with a careful look at her use of point of view and irony in the opening paragraphs that a reader must begin his exploration of the story.

The first paragraph of the story introduces the major character -- Mr. Head -- whose personality will overshadow everything else in the plot. It is early in the morning, well before dawn, and Head has half-wakened and is staring sleepily at his bedroom. The imagery and the tone of the paragraph seem to indicate that he is still more asleep than

awake, as he watches the moonlight overlaying his shabby possessions with a veneer of elegance. While he lays in the dark he begins to think about the coming day, and the reader begins to sense that something unususal and important is scheduled.

He thinks of his age, which he describes as "a choice blessing"[6] and how it has prepared him in a unique way. As he thinks:

> only with years does a man enter into that calm understanding of life that makes him a suitable guide for the young. This, at least, had been his experience. (p. 111).

This, naturally, prepares for the initiation experience to come, although as yet it has not been directly mentioned. He sits up to check the time and we can see O'Connor deftly relating Head's poverty in a few details -- the iron bed-posts, overturned bucket serving as a night-table, and a broken alarm clock. The clock does double duty, since she also uses it to make a point about Head's faculties. She says that "he was not dependent on any mechanical means to awaken him." This information, like most of the information so far, is related to Head's spiritual condition:

> Sixty years had not dulled his responses; his physical reactions, like his moral ones, were guided by his will and strong character, and these could be seen plainly in his features.

The description of Head which follows is a comic picture of the stereotyped backwoodsman, but his long, tube-like

features are only lightly touched on before she returns to a description of his moral character, and the comedy doesn't seem to add or detract from the information which surrounds it. Especially since she begins comparing Head to two famous guides -- Vergil and Raphael. The mention of these two, famous for the help they gave to wanderers in search of spiritual truth, reminds us of the suggestion of the initiation experience in the second paragraph. In the next sentence she introduces the second major character, Nelson, who is lying on his pallet in the shadow. The reader now knows that Head is involved somehow in introducing Nelson to a new experience, that he is an old man and seems able to guide Nelson spiritually.

The description of Nelson re-inforces this information. He is discovered sleeping in a fetal position, guarded by a slop jar which has been transformed into a "small personal angel." He has apparently been outfitted with a new suit and hat -- they are still in their boxes -- and this information, when we remember the poverty of the room itself, leads us to believe that something truely important has been planned.

O'Connor has, so far, forced her reader to gather most of this information for himself. He still has no knowledge of the exact nature of the journey or initiation, nor does he know the precise relationship between the two characters. She prefers to hold back the essentials until first impressions have been established.

As Head tries to return to sleep, we continue to listen to his thoughts. We learn that he thinks of the coming day as a "moral mission" which he is confident he can complete. One of his last thoughts is of waking up early enough to start breakfast before Nelson awakes, a homey touch which re-emphasizes previous remarks about his qualifications as a spiritual guide -- at least until the next sentence. For here the reader learns that the real reason that Head is anxious to be first up is because "the boy was always irked" when he was. This strange, and apparently unprovoked, spitefulness seems childish and damages the conception of Head which had been forming. But, like the parodic description of his features, it goes by rather quickly, and is replaced by a description of the complicated arrangements Head has made for the train to stop at the junction to pick them up. Aside from distracting attention from the eagerness to irritate Head has just shown, the arrangements further provide some indication of the remoteness of their location, of the great distance they are travelling to reach the city.

Now that the purpose of the coming experience has finally been learned, it is easier to fit the story into conventional patterns. Head is taking Nelson to the city -- obviously intending to show him the pitfalls and dangers which await the unsophisticated. A journey from the country to the wasteland, a moral mission to teach the boy that he is better off at home -- it is an old and familiar story. And yet, as the reader

listens in on the first bits of dialogue about the journey between Head and Nelson, he is beginning to suspect that things are not as they seem.

The first exchange between the two is over the number of times that Nelson has been to the city, Nelson's argumentative responses are hard to explain, he seems much too eager to have the last word. Head appears to be the soul of patience, and is obviously right that this will be Nelson's first real experience with the city since he was only an infant when he was there before. Rather than give in to what seems to be manifest truth, Nelson responds with a dig at Head's competence as a guide: "If you ain't been there in fifteen years, how you know you'll be able to find your way about?" (p. 112). Even at this, which would try any parent's patience, Head responds reasonably. He does indeed seem to have "that calm understanding of life that makes him a suitable guide for the young."

The last paragraph before Head drops off to sleep appears to re-inforce this. As he tells Nelson in the first line "The day is going to come when you'll find you ain't as smart as you think you are," we are confident that this is going to be that day. His memory of the background to the trip has established his own ability to deal reasonably with the boy's impudence, and his hopes for the results of the initiation seem to fit this picture of Head as a capable leader of a moral mission. The paragraph continues:

> He had been thinking about this trip for several months but it was for the most part in moral terms that he conceived it. It was to be a lesson that the boy would never forget. He was to find out from it that he had no cause for pride merely because he had been born in a city. He was to find out that the city is not a great place.

One of the things which has contributed greatly to the highly moral impression of Head which has been formed is the impersonal, formal tone of the narrator. The narrator seems to take Head as seriously as he takes himself, and a reader is naturally drawn in to accept this point of view as valid. When more information is available with which to judge Head, the hyperbole of these opening lines can be seen as comic reduction -- she is puffing him up here only to deflate him with irony. Until the reader is aware of this, however, he will probably be taken in by the tone which now seems merely detatched. O'Connor does provide, in the concluding lines of this paragraph, a hint of what is to come and a clue to the reader that his perception of Head may not be accurate.

In these last lines we are told that Head wants Nelson to see "everything there is to see in a city so that he would be content to stay at home for the rest of his life." Put this baldly, the purpose of this archetypal initiation experience seems cruel and imprisoning. If he is really on his toes one might pause to think that it is also naive -- initiation experiences rarely if ever result in the ability to return to the location of our lost innocence and remain

there. The tone has not changed, but the reader is beginning to remember discordant notes in Head's reverie -- his comic features which seemed to contradict the high moral tone he assumed for himself, and especially the petty maliciousness of his desire to irk Nelson by rising before him.

The next line is an echo of the line which began the paragraph and which seemed, then, a natural response to Nelson's impudence:

> He fell asleep thinking how the boy would at last find out that he was not as smart as he thought he was.

Now, however, the line seems to have taken on a less spiritual tone. Perhaps it is only the repetition of it, perhaps it is its conjunction with Head's grasping hope to keep the boy down on the farm after he's seen the city, O'Connor's magic is hard to pin down, harder to explicate. And whatever the response to these lines, it will probably be overshadowed by the direct information testifying to Head's high moral character. Nevertheless, the reader will now be suspicious where he had been complacent; he has seen her use irony, juxtaposition, and parody where they apparently don't belong, and this may be enough to make him begin to wonder about the validity of his impressions. At this point, he may be reminded of the dragon he has heard about, but he still has not had a complete look at him.

Head is awakened by the smell of breakfast cooking, Nelson has beaten him in the contest over who would be first

up. Head's confidence in his ability to wake up unassisted was an important point in O'Connor's description of his character, is she contradicting herself here? As the reader watches Head and Nelson bickering he can't help but wonder what happened to the spirituality which was so important all through the opening paragraphs. It is finally revealed that they are grandfather and grandson, that Nelson is illegitimate and has never known a mother. But more important than the family history is the first-hand look of the two in action.

Nelson has apparently gotten up so early because, like any ten year old, he is excited about the trip and anxious to start. I say apparently because he never mentions or shows that excitement to Head. On the contrary, he is the picture of casual indifference. His efforts to control what most children would be raising a fuss about -- excitement over a first trip to the city -- are due to the running feud that he and Head are carrying on. Head's first words: "It's no hurry, you'll get there soon enough and it's no guarantee you'll like it when you do neither" are a challenge to Nelson to reveal his childishness, to drop the mask of indifference and behave like the little kid he is.

Since Nelson successfully ignores the challenge, Head decides to bait him further: "You may not like it a bit, it'll be full of niggers." Nelson handles this with practiced cynicism and silence, and his lack of response deflates Head's smugness. Nelson is apparently not objecting to Head's racism,

in a moment he will seem to share it, and the innocent prejudice of a child who has never seen a Black ironically destroys the picture of the perfect leader which has been built up for Head. Nelson's response is also ironic because it is incomplete. He understands racism only as part of his relationship to his grandfather, not in relation to mankind in general. He has learned to use the word "nigger," but only as part of the continuous battle with Head, and he will shortly fail to recognize his "first nigger" on the train. But the reader also notes the irony of finding racism in a moral missionary.

If Head quit with that one reference it would merely be added to the growing pile of things which the reader hasn't been able to reconcile, and would probably be similarly ignored; unfortunately, he doesn't quit. Having failed to score points off Nelson's hidden enthusiasm, Head decides to press what he considers to be a real advantage. Since the last Black had been "run out" of the county twelve years ago (Head claims some credit for the act himself) Nelson has never had any direct contact with another race. Yet Nelson's response to the remark quoted above about the city seems designed to indicate that he will know the proper response when actually confronted with a Black: "the boy made a face as if he could handle a nigger." (p. 113). Head decides to challenge this by reminding him of his ignorance, his lack of experience. Nelson, like a seasoned soldier, parries with an attack of

his own: "You wasn't up very early," which Head simply ignores.

This childish squabbling is doing serious damage to our conception of Head, although we don't have time, as we are reading, for much reflection on this point. A feeling is growing into a concept though, however subtly it is perceived.

Head's next comment has such an unusual effect and significance that it is worth a long, hard look. Nelson has finally taken the bait and replied to Head's diversionary attack. Head is mad because Nelson was up first, he initially attacked him on this point but lost to the boy's silence. Too proud to drop the fight and accept defeat, he has attacked on a new front -- Nelson's innocence -- and has finally provoked a response from the boy. Now that Nelson has agreed to fight on Head's terms, the old man presses his advantage. Nelson claims that he probably saw lots of Blacks when he was born -- this is a direct reference to the fight which initiated the trip and which has already been described. It is at this point that Head makes a statement, in the form of a counter-attack, which has a curious effect on the reader. His response, which he hopes will be a winning thrust, is:

> If you seen one you didn't know what he was... A six-month old child don't know a nigger from anybody else.

This is quite true -- racism is learned and a six-month old child couldn't possibly have learned enough of it to apply

that label to anyone, even if he could talk. If Head used it to prove the complete irrelevancy of racism the reader would have to conclude that the exorbitant claims which had been made about his ability as a spiritual guide were deserved. Unfortunately, the opposite is the case. Head is demonstrating his superiority over his grandson, flaunting his own experience and crowing about the innocence of his charge. What he says is true, but his reasons for saying it are unacceptable in a moral missionary; and the lesson he draws from it is not what one would hope for from someone who has been compared to Vergil and Raphael.

Head's racism is evil, his eagerness to pass it on to his innocent grandson is eviler, but evilest of all is the pride that he is showing throughout this scene. He has won the first battle of the morning (Nelson acknowledges this by his retreat to the privy) but he has lost the initially high perception of him which the reader had accepted so quickly. Having now formed an ironic conception of Head, the reader may profitably return to the first paragraph to discover additional irony. For O'Connor's point of view there had rendered the irony more subtly.

As the story opens Head is lying in bed at two in the morning, anxious to begin what is apparently a very important day. His drowsiness helps to reconcile the problems encountered the first time around. When Head claims that age is a choice blessing which gives "that calm understanding of life

that makes him a suitable guide for the young," the reader is eager to chalk up his self-satisfaction to his dreaminess. He has seen Head act in direct contradiction to his opinion of himself, and can conclude that the childish pride apparent in his confrontation with Nelson has also produced this self-deception. As his thoughts are followed down the page, the irony of his comments becomes more apparent.

Since it is known that Head is going to oversleep, his reliance on his physical reactions to awaken him also becomes ironic, and with it the statement which accompanies the remarks about the alarm clock. The reader has been told that "his physical reactions, like his moral ones, were guided by his will and strong character," and he realizes now that if one part of that statement is false, perhaps all of it is. He seems to be trapped inside Head's perception of himself, and the first time around he had nothing to test those perceptions against and so had to accept them as valid. But now that the reader has begun to doubt the old man's dreamy reflections, where does he stop?

What can be done, for example, with the comparison with Vergil -- greatest of the Roman poets and guide for Dante's trip through the Inferno -- and Raphael -- the archangel (his name means God has healed in Hebrew) who guided the blinded and impoverished Tobias back to the way of the Lord? Now that the reader has heard this poet/angel speak, has listened in on his self-centered hopes for the outcome of the

trip, and has discovered the pervasive irony of O'Connor's point of view toward him, he probably sees this comparison as simply another joke, more irony to add fuel to her fire. But he shouldn't be too quick to dispense with the joke, it will come in handy in dealing with the conclusion.

Since he has acquired the means with which to test Head's perception of himself, the reader can see that he has been deceived by Head as easily as he deceived himself. Head is too dominated by his pride to reach an accurate understanding of himself (something which one would expect from a spiritual guide). O'Connor, by witholding the information needed to test his perceptions, has allowed the reader to be taken in; she has tricked him into a false impression, perhaps to lend more impact to the truth when it is finally perceived. Only when we look more closely at the language itself do we realize the extent of her deception. This is revealed through an awareness of the ironic tone of these early paragraphs, and the full knowledge necessary for an accurate interpretation of this information depends on a reading of the entire story.

Head's perception of himself reveals a mind with a high opinion of itself, and there is nothing unusual about that -- not even if we are truely dealing with one of the "great guides of men." Closer examination of the language discloses a fact which is easily overlooked. The reader has been reading what he thought to be the sleepy ramblings of an old man's mind, but he has actually been reading narrative description,

the apparently omniscient narrator has related Head's thoughts to us. While he might be expected to doubt the validity of Head's own perception, the reader more readily accepts as true the same information when it is conveyed to him by a second party. O'Connor is banking on this easy acceptance, at least initially, of the narrator as a reliable source. Nothing that has been reported up to the point where he enters the kitchen has been spoken or thought directly by Head: the information concerning the benefits of old age is prefixed "Mr. Head could have said," not "said"; and the information about his strong character is given as simple statement of fact by the narrator, there is not even any indication that Head himself has thought this. Clearly, O'Connor is playing with her reader; since the bulk of the information which the narrator gives proves to be false, one must be constantly aware of the disguised ironic tone of this apparently reliable narrator. Two important examples from the first page demonstrate the extent of the narrator's deception and the way in which O'Connor uses this deception to control her reader's point of view and hide her own.

The first example can be found in the description of Head as a caricature of the long, lean, backwoodsman. In the midst of that description she mentions his eyes, and the description becomes the occasion for the comparison mentioned above. It is time to look at the entire passage in the hope of recognizing the method to her irony:

> His eyes were alert but quiet, and in the miraculous moonlight they had a look of composure and ancient wisdom as if they belonged to one of the great guides of men. He might have been Vergil summoned in the middle of the night to go to Dante, or better, Raphael, awakened by a blast of God's light to fly to the side of Tobias.

This extremely flattering -- and totally ironic -- portrait is not presented as Head's own opinion of himself, but is straight narrative description presented as fact in the middle of the otherwise accurate description of his face. Indeed, while Head's pride might have thought of the analogy of Raphael, it is doubtful if his apparently unsophisticated mind would have conjured up the greatest Roman poet. She is playing tricks again, locking the perception of her protagonist into a false and ironic misconception. Only much later does the reader learn the whole truth, and find enough information to safely doubt the only guide he has to the story -- the narrator. Until then he is forced to rely on the narrator just as Nelson is forced to rely on Head, even though he realizes -- as Nelson does -- that he may be led astray.

The most important single piece of narrative description in the entire story is contained in the first paragraph. Unless it is thoroughly understood the reader will have no way to interpret correctly the conclusion of the story, or to find its central theme. In the analogy, Raphael was awakened by "a blast of God's light" and in the first paragraph we see that Head has apparently been awakened by a very different light.,

the moonlight -- which is described as "miraculous" in the passage quoted above. And it is the moonlight, and its miraculous qualities, which is the key to the first paragraph and also to my reading of the story.

The first paragraph contains, in capsualized form, most if not all of the major themes and motifs of the story. The first line should alert the reader to the description ahead, and to the problem of accurate perception: "Mr. Head awakened to discover that the room was full of moonlight." The description that follows is a dreamlike transformation of Head's backwoods cottage into the luxurious palace of an aristocrat or king. This lunacy can be excused from Head, perhaps, since he is still dreamy from sleep (only when we later learn of his spiritual aspirations do his materialistic dreams seem ironic). But as the bare floorboards turn to silver, the uncovered pillow ticking turns to brocade, the straight-backed chair turns into a servant, the reader is only dimly aware that these are not Head's thoughts, but pure narrative description. Since even the moon is described as awaiting Head's permission to enter the room, he is easily drawn into thinking there is some validity to this distorted and inflated perception of the protagonist.

The moonlight transforms everything in this first paragraph, alters the appearance of reality and therefore our perception of it. The reader is as lost as Nelson is soon to be, since he has no source of reliable information to turn

to for the "truth". The attempted inflation of Head into an aristocrat seems to be an endorsement by the narrator, until one learns differently he is controlled by this first glimpse of Head. If these had been merely his own sleepy perceptions the reader would have known what to do with them -- it is only his natural trust in the narrator which allows him to be deceived.

The face on the moon, as it waits for Head's permission to enter his presence, is "grave," and this is one of the only hints that something serious is going on here. In context, "grave" seems to mean only reverentially respectful, which fits the formality established by the tone and imagery, but later "grave" becomes ominous, when we learn of Nelson's predicament and Head's pride. The distortion of the reality of his impoverished surroundings (which seem to be an emblem of his spiritual impoverishment) into the manifestation of his pride in one of O'Connor's finest effects. Throughout the story she relies on light to provide an index to reality, a key to the accuracy of a character's perception. Just before the climactic denial of Nelson she remarks:

> The sun shed a dull light on the narrow street; everything looked like exactly what it was. (p.122).

In the first paragraph, of course, everything looks like exactly what Head wishes it was.

The last line of the first paragraph serves as a clue to the major theme of the story, or at least to part of it.

As the moon floats over the horse stall it appears to "contemplate itself with the look of a young man who sees his old age before him." This, of course, is a fairly accurate description of what is to happen to Nelson, and the ambiguity which surrounds Nelson at the end of the story is due to the uncertainty over what he thinks of his future as it is represented by Head.

The first paragraph of the story, therefore, introduces the reader to the unreliable narrator; it also introduces the ironic tone so important to a final evaluation, it shows him his first glimpse of style as a comment on content for an ironic juxtaposition, and introduces the controlling symbol for the story -- light as it symbolizes perception as well as the Divine Light of God's grace. The moonlight is deceptive and leads to inaccurate perception ("lunacy"). The moon does not produce light but merely reflects the sun's light when the sun is absent. All of this will become increasingly important as the story moves along. The reader soon discovers that he has been deceived about Head and his ability as a guide, but only by watching dialogue and action in the cold, hard light of day and comparing them to these first impressions. He has nearly been devoured by the dragon at the side of the road, but forewarned is forearmed and the reader will be ready for him next time.

CHAPTER TWO

"He's never seen anything before," Mr. Head continued. "Ignorant as the day he was born, but I mean for him to get his fill once and for all."... "The only thing to do with a boy," he said sagely, "is to show him all it is to show. Don't hold nothing back." (p. 115)

Mr. Head's intention, to "show all it is to show" will come back to haunt him before the day is over, and Nelson certainly does get his fill--although hopefully not "once and for all." This little speech, which seems designed to humiliate Nelson, is spoken to a fellow traveler on the train to Atlanta whom Head has awakened through his inconsiderate reading aloud of his ticket. Typically, Head's stifling intention to scare Nelson into staying at home is combined here with what seems to be acceptable child-rearing technique--"don't hold nothing back." Head's good impulses seem all tangled up with his bad ones, and his pride in his superiority over Nelson is becoming more obvious. I would like to examine three key scenes in the story to demonstrate O'Connor's use of a more straightforward point of view than is found in the opening pages and to describe the working out of the initiation experience to show the depth of Head's sin.

One of the things that we found in the first few paragraphs which we can reasonably expect to continue

is her use of what might be called the pregnant image. We are accustomed to watching meaning being born from those images in the form of triplets, or even quintuplets. The multiplicity of meanings which she saw in certain images is obviously a product of her own perception of reality, which can also be seen in her rich appreciation of irony. But we have evidence that this perception was far from an unexamined artistic impulse, O'Connor commented on it frequently when describing her own work or the work of authors she admired. In a defense of the use of the grotesque in fiction she once said:

> /The writer of grotesque fiction is/ looking for one image that will connect or combine or embody two points; one is a point in the concrete, and the other is a point not visible to the naked eye, but believed in by him as the one that everybody sees.[1]

In the lecture to the class of short story writers quoted from earlier she made a more general statement of this point, and described the process by which a detail can take on special symbolic significance, as distinct from the more conventional use of symbolism:

> The short story requires more drastic procedures than the novel because more has to be accomplished in less space. The details have to carry more immediate weight. In good fiction, certain of the details will tend to accumulate meaning from the story itself, and when this happens, they become symbolic in their action.[2]

Perhaps the best example of this in the story is the shifting significance of the tunnel image. Generally it is used conventionally to symbolize the opening to Hell, in which case it is almost always associated with Head. In one crucial scene, however, she applies the image to Nelson's awakened sensuality. In this case the tunnel seems to symbolize the opening to the boy's dark subconscious, where his emotions have been kept in hiding. The connotations of Hell are still used, but they take a backseat to the meaning which has "accumulated from the story itself."

In another context she spoke of the limitations on a writer, the principle one being reality itself, which she referred to as the "what-is":

> When the finished work suggests that pertinent actions have been fraudulently manipulated or over-looked or smothered, whatever purposes the writer started out with have already been defeated. What the fiction writer will discover, if he discovers anything at all, is that he himself cannot move or mold reality in the interests of abstract truth. The writer learns, perhaps more quickly than the reader, to be humble in the face of what-is. What-is is all he has to do with; the concrete is his medium; and he will realize eventually that fiction can transcend its limitations only by staying within them.[3]

If O'Connor seems less constrained by these limitations than most modern writers it is probably the result

of her perception of reality itself. The last of these three statements will become especially important in evaluating the conclusion of the story, but all provide useful insight into the manner in which she constructed the scenes we are about to consider.

The first of these scenes might be described, as Head in fact describes it to the man across from him, as Nelson's "first nigger". O'Connor has already demonstrated, in the interchange at the breakfast table, the artificiality of the concept of "nigger". As she has Head remark, "a six-month old child don't know a nigger from anybody else." This, in conjunction with the as yet unexplained title, should be enough to make her point clear. Perhaps she felt that the point needed reinforcement here, perhaps the breakfast war was only introduction to the actual demonstration, or--more likely--her theme is deeply connected to an aspect of racism and Nelson's responses to it. Whatever her private rationale, the scene works well dramatically for several reasons, and provides a demonstration of her use of minor characters as images or symbols rather than as fully developed members of the cast.

The scene begins immediately after Head's statement of his intentions which began this chapter. As he finishes talking to the passenger across the aisle, Head

sees something which causes a dramatic change in his expression:

> A huge coffee-colored man was coming slowly forward. He had on a light suit and a yellow satin tie with a ruby pin on it. One of his hands rested on his stomach which rode majestically under his buttoned coat, and in the other he held the head of a black walking stick that he picked up and set down with a deliberate outward motion each time he took a step. He was proceeding very slowly, his large brown eyes gazing over the heads of the passengers. He had a small white mustache and white crinkly hair. Behind him there were two young women, both coffee-colored, one in a yellow dress and one in a green. Their progress was kept at the rate of his and they chatted in low throaty voices as they followed him.

Like all of the other minor characters in the story, the Black is used as an image to cause a response from the main characters. None of the minor characters are developed fully, and most have an element of the grotesque about them which seems their main reason for inclusion--for example the train conductor with his "face of an ancient bloated bulldog" (p. 114). But the Black is given such a colorful costume, such a prepossessing physique, and such a fascinating motion--he moves like some ancient galleon under full sail and light wind--that any ten year old would be delighted to watch him.

Head decides to seize the opportunity as an

occasion for instruction. His original reaction to the Black was an emotional one. He grabbed Nelson's arm and "a light, fierce and cautious both, came into his eyes." All he could say at that point is "Look," but now he seems to have regained his composure.

Since this is the first new experience to which Head is initiating the boy, the reader should watch him carefully. Unfortunately, scrutiny reveals a highly unflattering perspective. It is impossible to disentangle the coming "instruction" from Head's eager attempt to embarass Nelson. He is showing off his worldly knowledge, and his crowing pride only humiliates Nelson. O'Connor is careful to detail Nelson's mounting apprehension in the dialogue which follows and this is probably designed to indicate that he has endured similar interrogations in the past. At the same time, the reader becomes an eyewitness to the corruption of Nelson's innocence.

Head's first question is "What" (not who) "was that?" and that designation reveals his own perception of the Black quite clearly:

> "What was that?"
> "A man," the boy said and gave him an indignant look as if he were tired of having his intelligence insulted.
> "What kind of man?" Mr. Head persisted, his voice expressionless.
> "A fat man," Nelson said. He was beginning to feel that he had better

be cautious.
"You don't know what kind?" Mr. Head said in a final tone.
"An old man," the boy said and had a sudden forboding that he was not going to enjoy the day.
"That was a nigger," Mr. Head said and sat back.

Nelson now knows that he has been trapped, and Head loses no time in rubbing it in. The boy's immediate reaction is hatred, but, curiously, he directs that hatred not at Head, but at the innocent Black:

> Nelson turned backward again and looked where the Negro had disappeared. He felt that the Negro had deliberatly walked down the aisle in order to make a fool of him and he hated him with a fierce raw fresh hate; and also, he understood now why his grandfather disliked them. He looked toward the window and the face /reflected/ there seemed to suggest that he might be inadequate to the day's exactions. He wondered if he would even recognize the city when they came to it. (p. 116).

This is the first of the day's initiations--the first thing which Head teaches the boy. Not only the content of the message, but also the medium of its transmission (his braying superiority) condemns Head, and utterly shakes any faith in him as a spiritual guide. His pride in trapping the boy into revealing his innocence, and the opportunity this provides to humiliate Nelson in public, shows Head at his worst. He will commit graver sins today, but this first is damning enough.

Much of the meaning of the scene is contained in Nelson's complaint to Head that he has been misinformed. The complaint comes between Head's gloating and the beginnings of Nelson's racism described above. He is partially trying to shift the "blame" for his innocence to his guide, partially trying to meet Head's attack with an offensive move of his own: "You said they were black," he said in an angry voice. "You never said they were tan. How do you expect me to know anything when you don't tell me right?" Beneath the surface meaning of the complaint is, of course, a capsule description of Nelson's dilemma, Head's guilt, and his total inadequacy as a guide. This is reinforced in Head's response to the complaint: "You're just ignorant is all." Nelson's ignorance is, of course, the whole point. Head's unfeeling, prideful treatment of his charge is now fully exposed.

Nelson himself is the source of much confusion in this story. Most fiction which details an initiation experience focuses on the young innocent as a matter of course; but O'Connor, from the beginning, has been much more concerned with the guide than the guided. At the story's conclusion the reader learns that the initiation has apparently been Head's after all, but until then he is curious at the lack of attention she pays to the boy.

She first revealed Nelson, sleeping in the appropriate but ironic fetal position, in the shadow of the moonlight--untouched by the illusions and false perceptions which dominated our interest. Since then he has dressed himself all in grey, in the new suit and broad-brimmed hat which is a size too large "because they expected his head to grow." (p. 112). O'Connor tells us that he and Head could have been brothers, they look so much alike, and Head's costume is identical to Nelson's but in black.

When they first take their seats on the train it is still dark out, and the windows only give back the reflection of the lighted coach. Since he is unable to see where he is going, Nelson has nothing to look at but his own reflection, and what he sees lends an ominous note to their ride:

> he saw a pale ghost-like face
> scowling at him beneath the brim
> of a pale ghost-like hat. His
> grandfather, looking quickly too,
> saw a different ghost, pale but
> grinning, under a black hat. (p. 114).

Unlike the moonlight, which is also a reflection, this indirect lighting seems closer to reality. Nelson's new hat keeps the sunlight, the cold, hard, light of day, off of him, but it also protects him from the illusions bred by the moonlight. Unfortunately it can't entirely block the sunlight, and the unpleasant reality it

illuminates, although he will pull it lower and lower over his eyes all day in an attempt to shut out that reality. The hat begins the trip with a sharp new crease, but by the time the day is over his tugging and pulling have stretched all the crease out of it. Immediately after Head denies him, we are told: "his hat was jammed on his head so that there were no longer any creases in it;" (p. 123).

Other than this we know little of his response to his grandfather's continuous stream of misinformation. The focus in most of these scenes is on Head and his reactions to the new experience of having Nelson totally dependent on him. Occasionally, whenever he is apprehensive of the strange events in the city, Nelson will reach up to hold Head's hand. This is one of the only indications that O'Connor gives us that she is really dealing with a ten-year old, for most of Nelson's reactions are sadly mature.

Two of the things which Head is careful to point out to Nelson are the toilet system on the train and the sewage system in the city. He takes an almost personal pride in them, perhaps feeling an unconscious kinship, and Nelson is certainly impressed (back on the farm they're still using the outdoor privy). The description of the sewage system can stand as an emblem of all of

the things which Head misinforms Nelson about, but it also does double duty, as O'Connor said certain details should:

> Mr. Head explained the sewer system, how the entire city was underlined with it, how it contained all the drainage and was full of rats and how a man could slide into it and be sucked along down endless pitch-black tunnels. At any minute any man in the city might be sucked into the sewer and never heard from again. He described it so well that Nelson was for some seconds shaken. He connected the sewer passages with the entrance to Hell and understood for the first time how the world was put together in its lower parts. He drew away from the curb.
>
> Then he said, "Yes, but you can stay away from the holes," and his face took on that stubborn look that was so exasperating to his grandfather. "This is where I come from!" he said. (p. 119).

The tunnel imagery is probably connected to the early description of Head's "long, tube-like face" (p. 111), and is certainly a precursor of the "pitchblack tunnel" Nelson feels he is reeling down later, as well as the "hollow tunnel" Head sees in front of him after he has denied Nelson. The "tunnel" of his face may be the emblem of his inner Hell, and the "hollow tunnel" is the suburban Hell he wanders through contemplating his sin. But Nelson's tunnel, as we shall see, represents something quite different.

Head soon manages to get them lost in the Atlanta

wasteland. It is an ugly city, hot and dusty, populated by alienated strangers and machines that work only ironically. The scale which gets their weights wrong tells Head he is "upright and brave and all your friends admire you," but it is at least correct--again only ironically--when it warns Nelson: "You have a great destiny ahead of you but beware of dark women." The dark woman--who might also be described as Nelson's "second nigger"--provides the second important scene to be discussed in this chapter.

Head has lost both their lunch and his only landmark--the "putty-colored terminal with a concrete dome on top." As they wander in imperfect circles they find themselves in the Black section. Instead of owning up to his mistakes, Head refuses to even ask the Blacks for help. Nelson "was afraid of the colored men and he didn't want to be laughed at by the colored children." Suddenly he sees an immense black woman and feels strangely drawn to ask directions of her. Although she mocks him playfully--he has asked how to get back to town and she tells him that he's still in it--her serenity and sensuality have an almost erotic effect on the boy. This may be said to be the one moment with the most potential for self-knowledge that he will have all day. Head's denial of him is, of course, equally

important; but the knowledge he gains from the "dark woman" is totally new to him, whereas he might have expected that his grandfather would let him down just when he needed him most.

Although we have seen that the story thus far has been saturated in irony, it is difficult if not impossible to find any irony at all in Nelson's response to the black woman. At any rate, as we watch Nelson's reaction to her playful answers to his desperate questions, we are aware that he is feeling emotions which had been previously repressed beneath his consciousness:

> He understood she was making fun of him but he was too paralyzed even to scowl. He stood drinking in every detail of her. His eyes traveled up from her great knees to her fore-head and then made a triangular path from the glistening sweat on her neck down and across her tremendous bosom and over her bare arm back to where her fingers lay hidden in her hair. He suddenly wanted her to reach down and pick him up and draw him against her and then he wanted to feel her breath on his face. He wanted to look down and down into her eyes while she held him tighter and tighter. He had never had such a feeling before. He felt as if he were reeling down through a pitchblack tunnel...Nelson would have collapsed at her feet if Mr. Head had not pulled him roughly away. "You act like you don't have any sense!" the old man growled. (p. 120).

Even the rhythm which starts the paragraph off at

such a slow pace gradually gathers speed until it is fairly racing at the end; the sensuous feel of the many rounded vowel sounds, along with the repitition of the soft t's and d's which seem to accumulate near the conclusion, add to the erotic impression. Nelson's eyes focus on a landscape of huge maternity. The sweaty sensuality of the black woman, along with her gargantuan, nearly grotesque, proportions, could easily be seen as a parody of the earth mother. But if O'Connor is laughing she is doing so gently. The effect of the scene on Nelson is traumatic, because Nelson is exceptionally vulnerable since he has felt his first ironic sensations and has unconsciously connected this to his need for a mother. By juxtaposing this gigantic mother figure with Head's brutal coldness in the fast-approaching denial scene she is again controling the reader's perceptions, through style and action as well as content, in order to shape the conclusions he will draw from them. This is, of course, her duty as a writer.

Head's comment returns us to irony. The mother/lover he sees before him has indeed robbed Nelson of his "senses" if we take Head's meaning; there is nothing rational about Nelson's response, indeed it goes against everything Head has taught him. Yet we can count on Head to be just as wrong as he is right--or to be right

for all the wrong reasons. Nelson hasn't lost his senses but has suddenly gotten them back; he is all sense, all sensuality. The rush of feeling which overwhelms him seems to come from all the way back to his birth--when his own mother died. Having never experienced maternal love, it is well past time for him to feel the lack. O'Connor realistically blends the maternal with the erotic. Head's rough pulling away is the perfect contrast and foil, and also reminds one of the racism he has been preaching all day.

Nelson's response to the scene quickly changes. He seems to feel just how exposed he has been, and Head is eager to rub it in. The cruelest touch O'Connor saves for last in the short paragraph which describes his only reaction:

> They hurried down the street and Nelson did not look back at the woman. He pushed his hat sharply forward over his face which was already burning with shame. The sneering ghost he had seen in the train window and all the foreboding feelings he had on the way returned to him and he remembered that his ticket from the scale had said to beware of dark women and that his grandfather's had said he was upright and brave. He took hold of the old man's hand, a sign of dependence that he seldom showed. (p. 121).

Nelson, who was reeling before that pitchblack tunnel of sensuality and natural responses, has been

pulled back by Head. But he has not merely returned to where he was, he is now closer to Head than he has ever been. If the old man was capable of craft and cunning he could seal that dependence, possibly forever; instead, he foolishly alienates Nelson by mocking the "weakness" the boy has shown. Head began the initiation experience by teaching Nelson a racist response, showing him an artificial difference between people, and forcing the boy to adopt those concepts as a defense against contact with other people. When confronted with the fact of his deeply felt need for affection, Nelson momentarily forgot that lesson. Now Head has reinforced the first lesson and added a new one--that it is foolish and unmanly to feel emotion and sensuality. The initiation is proceeding in fine style.

Once again exercising artistic judgement, O'Connor refuses to sentimentalize Nelson's realization of his dependence on Head. In fact, she has him reopen the feud, and it is the first time we've seen him start a fight with Head. He does this by insisting that he needs a rest, now that they have left the black section and think that they will be able to follow the trolley tracks back to the station. But he doesn't lose an opportunity to criticize Head's ability as a guide as he says: "I got to rest myself some. You lost the sack and the

directions. You can just wait on me to rest myself." (p. 121). But Head is feeling more sure of himself now that he is out of enemy territory, and he fights back. In fact, he brings up the heavy artillery, and attacks with relish Nelson's previous pride in his birthplace. He finishes with: "And standing there grinning like a chimp-an-zee while a nigger woman gives you directions. Great Gawd!" This devastates Nelson's well-worn defenses. Stripped of his own pride and the energy to continue the battle, totally disoriented and feeling his dependence on this sneering giant, Nelson breaks down and--for the first and last time--whimpers and whines like the hot and tired ten year old he is. His words come in a rush of emotion, since emotion is all he has left, and they form his surrender--his admission of defeat:

> "I never said I was nothing but born here," the boy said in a shaky voice. "I never said I would or wouldn't like it. I never said I wanted to come. I only said I was born here and I never had nothing to do with that. I want to go home. I never wanted to come in the first place. It was all your big idea. How you know you ain't following the tracks in the wrong direction?" (p. 121).

This is not total defeat, of course, that last line is another challenge--but not really a threatening one,

his heart's not in it. Curiously, he is right about the wrong direction, a fact that is directly responsible for everything that is about to happen. But the main message which is carried beneath the surface of Nelson's tantrum is one of surrender. His defenses have finally broken down, his cynicism has been unbalanced, and he is finally acting his age. If Head were on his toes he could, by simply saying and doing the right thing, win this last battle and thus the entire war. But we should have learned by this time that we can count on Head to do the opposite of what needs doing. And that is precisely what he does.

When Nelson refuses to go any further and lies down on the sidewalk to rest, he soon falls asleep, leaving Head to his own meager devices. Head is afraid to fall asleep himself and begins brooding over their predicament and especially over the prospect of Nelson waking up and demanding to be taken home. O'Connor's point of view has been perfectly straightforward in dealing with their adventures in the city, the sunlight leaves little leeway for illusions, but here she begins playing again. She gives the reader only partial access to Head's thoughts, and refuses to comment on the validity of his perception of the situation or his rationalization for the action to come:

> Mr. Head watched him silently. He

> was very tired himself but they could not both sleep at the same time and he could not have slept anyway because he did not know where he was. In a few minutes Nelson would wake up, refreshed by his sleep and very cocky, and would begin complaining that he had lost the sack and the way. You'd have a mighty sorry time if I wasn't here, Mr. Head thought; and then another idea occurred to him. He looked at the sprawled figure for several minutes; presently he stood up. He justified what he was going to do on the grounds that it is sometimes necessary to teach a child a lesson he won't forget, particularly when the child is always reasserting his position with some new impudence. He walked without a sound to the corner about twenty feet away and sat down on a covered garbage can in the alley where he could look out and watch Nelson wake up alone. (p. 121-122).

Head has finally reached his own level, and as he sits on his highly appropriate perch the reader realizes that there is almost nothing he won't do to save face with Nelson. The proper thing to do never occurres to him. A humble admission of his own ignorance (and innocence in this sense) is impossible so long as his perception is distorted by false pride. His cheap justification in the echo of the original motive for the trip itself reminds us of the stifling hopes he has for the outcome of the initiation. He feels that he has lost Nelson, although our perception of the boy indicates

differently, and he is willing to destroy his grandson in order to save him. And destruction is just around the corner.

Nelson's initiation has so far involved a gradual stripping away of his ability to intellectualize his situation. His "lessons" have been emotional responses to unfamiliar events--the hatred he "learned" from his "first nigger" and the shame at his erotic response he "learned" from the dark woman. In each case the "lesson" involved a distortion of reality, of the actual experience, because of Head's intervention. Nelson's perception is controlled by Head since he is always there after the experience to interpret reality for him. But, by continually confronting his emotional responses, Nelson seems to be dimly perceiving a thing or two not dependent on Head's perception. All that is needed is the proper response and his grandfather will have him securely in his power. Head's first attempt at this is a disaster.

When Nelson awakes to find himself abandoned, his response is, predictably, an emotional one--he takes off in an arbitrary direction at a full run. O'Connor says he is like "a maddened pony," and it's no wonder. Head had gotten tired of waiting for Nelson to awake and had used his garbage can perch to send out an appropriately

"hollow boom" to startle him. Just above this is the reference to sunlight mentioned in the first chapter. She seems to be reminding us of the earlier use of light, and to be telling us that we are finally seeing the true Head: "The sun shed a dull light on the narrow street; everything looked like exactly what it was." The sunlight reveals Head, "hunched like an old monkey on the garbage can lid." He has come about as far from the analogy with Vergil and Raphael and all the hyperbole of the first paragraphs as anyone could, and as Nelson runs down the street we are confident that Head's true nature is finally out in the open where we can see it.

In his wild gallop away from abandonment, Nelson runs headlong into an old woman carrying groceries. She is no maternal figure, though but a shrew. Although she spends most of her brief scene on the ground, howling in pain and screaming for the police, her agony seems to be mostly comic exaggeration. Like all of the other minor characters, she is used as a foil to elicit a response from the major characters.

Nelson is surrounded by harpies, all of the mean old women in the world seem to have shown up for the chance to take revenge on the careless little boys who have plagued them, and Nelson is their scapegoat. O'Connor paints the scene vividly, and with her usual

economy: "The women were milling around Nelson as if they might suddenly all dive on him at once and tear him to pieces, and the old woman continued to scream that her ankle was broken and to call for an officer."

Nelson has never been out of danger since we've known him, but the danger has never been so palpable before. This is Head's big chance. Aside from his duties as a guardian, he is directly responsible for the accident. If he accepts his guilt now, admits he is and has been wrong, and offers to set things right, we will forgive him everything.

But we should know what to expect by now from Head. He has been watching the persecution of Nelson from behind a trash box, but a mysterious "something" forces him to leave his true country and approach the howling women. He's dragging his heels, thinking about the police and his own safety. Nelson sees him coming and springs toward him. O'Connor shows the boy's desperation in one line: "The child caught him around the hips and clung panting against him." (p. 123).

This transfers the harpies' attack from grandson to grandfather, and the injured woman demands payment for her "injuries." Nelson is silently and unconsciously demanding the same thing, of course, but both injured parties fail to get what they deserve. In describing

what happens next, O'Connor returns to the mixed point of view she had in relating Head's decision to abandon Nelson in the first place. Most of the scene is reported as a perception of Head's responses by an omniscient narrator. Only in one line does she break in on Head's actual thoughts:

> Mr. Head was trying to detach Nelson's fingers from the flesh in the back of his legs. The old man's head had lowered itself into his collar like a turtle; his eyes were glazed with fear and caution.
>
> "Your boy has broken my ankle!" the old woman shouted. "Police!" Mr. Head sensed the approach of the policeman from behind. He stared straight ahead at the women who were massed in their fury like a solid wall to block his escape. "This is not my boy," he said. "I never seen him before."
>
> He felt Nelson's fingers fall out of his flesh.

Anyone who needs an interpretation of this scene need only to look at the next line to find O'Connor's meaning: "The women dropped back, staring at him with horror, as if they were so repulsed by a man who would deny his own image and likeness that they could not bear to lay hands on him." In denying Nelson, Head has denied himself.

As Head walks away from his grandson he sees a "hollow tunnel" before him, the image he taught to

Nelson has come back to haunt him, and this tunnel is certainly the opening to Hell. It is not the same tunnel, however, which Nelson saw when he stood in front of the dark woman. That tunnel led to his unconscious, to the full realization of his natural human impulses, to sensuality and emotion which had been denied him from Head who is so wrapped up in his pride and his thoughts (hence his name) that he has lost the capacity to express emotion. This is one of those details which O'Connor says "tend to accumulate meaning from the story itself." It is a measure of her artistry that she can use one image to carry more than one meaning, depending on context, rather than accepting a conventional symbolic meaning.

The one interruption in the description above relates Head's perception of a policeman coming up behind him. The fact that this perception is wrong, that there is no officer in sight, is nearly as significant as the denial itself. His perception has been distorted through the "fear and caution" which glaze his eyes here and which made them shine back on the train at the approach of Nelson's "first nigger." His pride has also been active here, since O'Connor has already told the reader that he had never been "accosted by a policeman." Regardless of the effect of the sunlight, Head sees no

more accurately now than he did in the moonlight. The difference, of course, is in the reader's perception of him; O'Connor had originally caused that perception to be distorted so that he was forced to see Head (through his own myopic eyes) here she lets him see action clearly and allows him to make up his own mind about its meaning.

The effect of the denial on Nelson is immediate. In the space of a paragraph he is transformed from a frightened child into a mature and "dignified" adult. The destruction of Nelson's childhood now seems complete, and one would expect the initiation to be over. O'Connor still has a card up her sleeve, but as he watches Nelson's reaction to the denial the reader feels as if he is seeing the climax of the boy's introduction to experience. That perception may prove to be premature.

Nelson has jammed his hat on his head "so that there were no longer any creases in it" in an attempt to block the sunlight and the new perception of Head it has given him. He follows Head "mechanically" at a distance of twenty paces. He cannot abandon his grandfather, since he has nowhere else to go, but he cannot overlook the sin which has just been commited either. He is trapped by his situation, but exercises what freedom he has by his refusal to speak to or walk with Head.

O'Connor tells us almost nothing of Nelson's mind, she mentions only that: "The boy was not of a forgiving nature but this was the first time he had ever had anything to forgive. Mr. Head had never disgraced him before." This is surely an ironic comment, indicating Nelson's own problems with perception.

She focuses instead on Head's reaction to his own sin. She says that, as he begins to feel "the depth of his denial," his features take on the outward appearance of his empty feelings. He has lost the way completely, and is afraid that if dark overtakes them they will be beaten and robbed. In what may be true repentance or only rationalized fear, Head says of the possibility that they will be mugged: "The speed of God's justice was only what he expected for himself, but he could not stand to think that his sins would be visited upon Nelson and that even now, he was leading the boy to his doom." The reader having had so much trouble with Head's self-perceptions before that he is naturally skeptical now and O'Connor returns to her original tactic of leaving the reader at the mercy of Head's perceptions with no information to test them by.

As Head walks blindly on he trips over a water spigot on a lawn. He recalls that neither of them had drunk anything all day and hopes that if they drink

together they will be re-united. We should remember this early attempt to "force" a re-union due to their mutual thirst, since it is a clear precursor of the significance of the "artificial nigger." Head has already tried to force them back together over a Coke, which Nelson silently refused. Now he is getting desperate. Nelson refuses to drink with Head, and his disdain causes real despair in the old man:

> He lost all hope. His face in the waning afternoon light looked ravaged and abandoned. He could feel the boy's steady hate, traveling at an even pace behind him and he knew that (if by some miracle they escaped being murdered in the city) it would continue just that way for the rest of his life. He knew that now he was wandering into a black strange place where nothing was like it had ever been before, a long old age without respect and an end that would be welcome because it would be the end. (p. 124).

This is his Hell, a living one which offers no escape. From the subtle interweaving of the inscription over Dante's Hell in the first three lines to the description of a "black strange place where nothing was like it had ever been before," there is no doubt of the perception here. The sunlight is fading, it is late afternoon, but we can still see things clearly--or can we? We assume that Head despairs because he realizes his true nature and he sees no hope for redemption, no

way out of Hell for the truly repentant, while they can still demonstrate that repentance on earth. Looking back over the passage one notices the last lines, a pathetic description of a lonely old age, and begins to wonder just what kind of Hell this is. Head is worried about living without respect. He is not concerned with the Divine Response to his sin, but is afraid that he will never regain his dominance over Nelson. If the reader remembers the grasping hope Head had for the trip, his desire to show the boy "everything there is to see in a city so that he would be content to stay at home for the rest of his life," he may begin to correctly interpret this strange despair.

O'Connor provides Head with an appropriate backdrop to his new-found sense of sin. Her description of the suburban neighborhood seems to indicate they are actually traveling through Hell. As Peter Hays points out:

> The description of the locale continues to remind one of The Inferno, especially of the Ninth Circle, Cocytus, the frozen pit in the depths of Hell, in which the betrayers are frozen in four concentric circles around Satan: "...frozen in the very center of Cocytus is three-headed Satan, ripping in his central mouth Judas Iscariot, betrayer of Christ.[4]

They have entered a rich suburb, the sun has dropped down behind the mansions which "were like partially submerged

icebergs in the distance." Head thinks of finding a sewer to disappear down just as he hears a bark and looks up to see "a fat man approaching with two bull dogs." If this is Hell, and the man and dogs are three-headed Satan, Head doesn't know it. His relief at finding someone to direct him to the train gets comically tangled up with his spiritual condition as he begs the man for help:

> He waved both arms like someone shipwrecked on a desert island. "I'm lost!" he called. "I'm lost and can't find my way and me and this boy have got to catch this train and I can't find the station. Oh Gawd I'm lost! Oh help me Gawd I'm lost!"

The inhabitants of this lily-white, upper class suburb could probably qualify as betrayers since their artificially restricted neighborhood is a denial of their human relationship with the Blacks. They therefore deserve their luxurious but frozen Ninth Circle. Also this ironic Vergil has been leading his Dante in a circular path torough an earthly Hell all day, so it is appropriate that they finish up in Cocytus. And the reference to Judas brings to mind Head's betrayal--so perhaps this is where he belongs too. But the most important part of the scene is Head's naked humility in asking for help--especially so desperatly. His pride seems to have been stripped away, leaving him ready for

the action of grace. If it came at this moment, Head would be saved.

Nelson, meanwhile, is in a Hell of his own. O'Connor says that he is plotting revenge, filling his mind with hatred for his grandfather, and planning on final retribution. This is, of course, a sin--even though the result of the initiation--and O'Connor indicates that Nelson needs help in ridding himself of the sin, and that he is getting it:

> As for Nelson, his mind had frozen around his grandfather's treachery as if he were trying to preserve it intact to present at the final judgement. He walked without looking to one side or the other, but every now and then his mouth would twitch and this was when he felt, from some remote place inside himself, a black mysterious form reach up as if it would melt his frozen vision in one hot grasp.

Nelson's vision has been frozen in sin, but something inside of him is trying to turn him away from that sin. Perhaps it is the same something which produced a similar vision as he slept on the sidewalk. There we were told: "The boy was dozing fitfully, half conscious of vague noises and black forms moving up from some dark part of him into the light." (p. 122). It may be the emotions stirred by the dark woman, it may be the action of mercy and grace, whatever its origin it is apparent that Nelson has the saving capacity to forgive. In a

minute he will have to act on that capacity, but it is by no means certain that he takes advantage of it.

CHAPTER THREE

> I suppose the devil teaches most of the lessons that lead to self-knowledge. 1 - F. O'Connor

The sins we have seen Head commit are not minor ones. His pride has caused him to humiliate his grandson, to lie to him and attempt to entrap him. His pride has also caused him to transmit his racism to the boy, to corrupt and distort Nelson's perception of mankind and to erect false barriers between the boy and the rest of the world. He has taught Nelson to repress his emotions and his capacity to love. Worst of all, of course, his pride--along with his cowardice--has caused him to deny his grandson when the boy needed him most, and in so doing he denied himself--his very reason for living--as a Christian and especially as a "spiritual guide."

O'Connor has shown these sins by juxtaposing Heads's distorted perception with "true" perceptions revealed through action and dialogue. His self-righteousness and pride allow him to set himself up as a spiritual guide, a distorted perception of his true nature and ability, and by doing so he has committed the gravest sin. As the reader watched him wander aimlessly through the suburb after the denial, he wasn't sure if Head had accepted responsibility for those sins. He is in despair, apparently over his utter failure in the denial scene, but he does not recognize his other sins--he has not yet achieved a true perception of himself. Until he does so he will remain trapped in his pride, unable to accept the offer

of grace.

The three-headed betrayer he meets in the frozen hell outside of Atlanta provides him with directions to the station, and Head is jubilant at the prospect of returning home. He "stared as if he were slowly returning from the dead," and turns to tell Nelson the good news, expecting that their deliverence will effect the boy as it has him. Nelson is still wrestling with his own sin of revenge, and O'Connor's description of him is a small masterpiece. She rarely refers to Nelson as a child--mainly because Head has forced him to act like an adult most of his life--but here she juxtaposes the designation with a description of his response to Head which would be terrible enough from an adult, and is truely horrible from a ten year old:

> The child was standing about ten feet away, his face bloodless under the gray hat. His eyes were triumphantly cold. There was no light in them, no feeling, no interest. He was merely there, a small figure, waiting. Home was nothing to him. (p.125).

This precipitates only deeper despair from Head. A possible indication that he is concerned more with Nelson's rejection of him than he is with his own guilt and sin. At any rate, the boy's refusal of a reconciliation makes Head sink deeper into guilt than he has so far gone. Then he sees something which distracts him:

> Mr. Head turned slowly. He felt he knew now what time would be like without seasons and what heat would

> be like without light and what man would be like without salvation. He didn't care if he never made the train and if it had not been for what caught his attention, like a cry out of the gathering dusk, he might have forgotten there was a station to go to.

The lack of mercy he sees in Nelson reminds him immediately of God's mercy and the hope of salvation. Yet he doesn't consider actual salvation, which would require little more than humility and sincere repentence from him now. His pride has suffered too mortal a blow to admit the possibility of mercy--he had perceived himself as righteous and good, and now perceives himself as irrevocably lost. Neither perception is accurate, but Head's pride won't let him see himself as anything but superlative, he can not be average or halfway.

The "cry out of the gathering dusk" which catches his attention is, of course, the artificial nigger. The statue is chipped, faded, and deformed, and is coming unstuck from its perch. It is about Nelson's size and, like Nelson, looks neither old nor young. Head has never seen anything like it before, it is an unfathomable mystery which stops him dead. Even Nelson is perplexed by it. His grandfather's startled response gives the statue a name, "an artificial nigger," which reveals the nature of their confusion to us. Their world-view has not prepared them for the possibility of lawn ornaments in general, but the racism which has preoccupied them all day has certainly made this apparent tribute to a Black unexplainable. The mystery grows out of their own sin

and false perception.

The description of the statue is ripe with meaning, and O'Connor packs a history into it which is remarkable to see:

> It was not possible to tell if the artificial Negro were meant to be young or old; he looked too miserable to be either. He was meant to look happy because his mouth was stretched up at the corners but the chipped eye and the angle he was cocked at gave him a wild look of misery instead.
>
> "An artificial nigger!" Nelson repeated in Mr. Head's exact tone.

The forced and shabby gayety and the misery showing beneath the surface need no commentary, but Nelson's reaction is worthy of close attention. He has had trouble with Head's racism all day; at first it humiliated him and later it made him ashamed of his newly recognized emotional needs. He has "learned" racism well enough but his response to the dark woman indicated that his knowledge of it is affected by his natural feelings. Since all "niggers" are artificial, intellectual constructs, racism itself is artificial and therefore fragile. He knows racism but he doesn't feel it. Yet it is racism which is about to reunite them, and has already made them identical in their ignorance:

> The two of them stood there with their necks forward at almost the same angle and their shoulders curved in almost exactly the same way and their hands trembling identically in their pockets. Mr. Head looked like an ancient child and Nelson like a miniature old man.

The actual cause of their reunion is their ignorance. They can't understand why anyone would want a statue of a Black on his front lawn, can't figure out what it represents. All day, and probably since they've known each other, they have carried on a running feud. Their battle is, in a sense, a battle of wits: each wanted the last word, wanted not just to be right but to expose the other's ignorance. The war between them has shut out any perception of their need for each other, and has disguised their true ignorance behind a facade of superficial knowledge. Since the reader has been focusing on Head, he tends to forget that Nelson is just as guilty of this distorted and dangerous perception. Under normal circumstances they would be scrambling to come up with an explanation of the statue, to be the first to explain it to the other. But their experiences have unsettled their normal responses, they are too emotionally exhausted to act in the familiar way. Caught off guard, they both expose their ignorance in a way they had neyer done before.

Although some, like Peter Hays,[2] claim the statue is Satan at the center of Hell, O'Connor has said, as we have noted, that it is the occasion for the offering of grace, the cause of their reunion; therefore must be an agent of the Divine. In forcing them to display their own ignorance, it brings them together in their mutual mystification. The reader has been pleading with Head all day to admit and accept his own ignorance, so far he hasn't. Now Someone Else is asking for

humility from him, and this may be his last chance to save himself.

Head and Nelson, as we have seen, are lost in the devil's territory and have now been offered grace. Immediately after the lines which unite them physically, she describes their apparently identical confusion, as well as Head's response to it:

> They stood gazing at the artificial Negro as if they were faced with some great mystery, some monument to another's victory that brought them together in their common defeat. They could both feel it dissolving their differences like an action of mercy. Mr. Head had never known before what Mercy felt like because he had been too good to deserve any, but he felt he knew now.

There has been some controversy over the precise meaning of "some monument to another's victory," and I have been unable to find anyone who can offer a satisfactory interpretation. The confusion is due to the explanation of the statue which Head is about to offer, which makes "another's victory" simply mean restricted real estate. But Head has not thought of this yet, since if he had there would be no reason for his confusion here. If we notice the rest of the sentence, which describes their "common defeat," we can guess that the "victory" involved is simply the knowledge behind the statue--the reason for putting it there in the first place. Head and Nelson are mystified by the fact that the rich suburbanites want to keep a statue of a "nigger" on their lily-white street. The impulse would never occur to them or their redneck friends at home.

The victory is in knowing why the statue is there, they are defeated by their inability to relate such a thing to their own lives.

Head's response to the mercy which he feels is being offered is an index to his own sin. It is, basically, the same response he has had to everything today--pride. His perceptions have always been annoying, often been sinful, and sometimes have been actively harmful to Nelson; but never has his pride so distorted the truth as it does here. His easy assumption that he had always been "too good to deserve any" mercy proves conclusively that he has not accepted responsibility for his sins, hasn't recognized his fatal pride, and is undeserving, therefore, of the offered grace. If not undeserving, he is at least so bound up in his distorted self-perception that he is unable to accept the offer once it has been made. The next lines tell this clearly, and show Head using the offered mercy to force a reunion, just as he had tried to use their mutual thirst before.

Head and Nelson have been reunited by their perception of their mutual ignorance; a satisfactory response to that ignorance would be humility and the beginning of a real relationship on the wreckage of their futile attempts to be one up on each other. Typically, Head takes the opposite approach:

> He looked at Nelson and understood
> that he must say something to the
> child <u>to show that he was still wise</u>
> and in the look the boy returned he
> saw a hungry need for that assurance.

> Nelson's eyes seemed to implore him to explain once and for all the mystery of existence. (emphasis added).

Nelson is not waiting for an explanation at all. His own sin, the hatred that was frozen in his mind, has apparently been exorcised by his realization of their common ignorance. Head has had several chances to do the right thing for Nelson and their relationship, but this is his greatest chance of all. As might be expected, his pride prevents the right response--an admission of mutual ignorance and innocence--and distorts his perception of the boy's imploring eyes. It is his own desire to return to his previous condition as a spiritual guide that creates the need to produce the answer to the "mystery of existence." The statue has perplexed Nelson, but it is doubtful that the mystery of existence has even crossed his mind.

Head's response to the imagined question is drenched in irony, and those critics who are eager for a "happy" ending have apparently misconstrued that irony as sincerity:

> Mr. Head opened his lips to make a lofty statement and heard himself say, "They ain't got enough real ones here. They got to have an artificial one." (p.126).

Head is probably ironically correct, as he so often has been, but it is doubtful that he could understand why. The upper class Whites who inhabit Cocytus feel free to decorate their homes with racist stereotypes precisely because they "ain't got enough real ones here." It is probable that not even their insensitivity would allow them to do so in a mixed neighborhood.[3] But Head seems to imagine that the statue is

taking the place of the real thing, or is operating as a negative signpost. Or perhaps he doesn't know what he means, which is more likely. Looking back reveals that some mysterious force has produced the answer for him, and he is surprised to hear it.

When we recall all of the misinformation sprinkled through with ironically correct answers that we have heard Head give to Nelson before, we shouldn't be surprised to find the phenomenon again. O"Connor has ironically suggested that Head has been given the knowledge, through the action of mercy, with which to answer Nelson. We must assume this is ironic since we realize the prideful impulse which has made him try to explain the statue, and the racist form of his "answer" to the question he thinks Nelson is asking. God doesn't work in ways that strange, His wonders to perform. We can also suspect Head's answer because of Nelson's response, or lack of response, to it:

> After a second, the boy nodded with a strange shivering about his mouth, and said, "Let's go home before we get ourselves lost again."

This doesn't seem to be the appropriate response from someone who has just been given the answer to the mystery of existence. He was on the verge of a complete reconcilliation with his grandfather, but the attempted answer (which must be as enigmatic to Nelson as the statue was) has shown him that Head really hasn't changed at all. His eagerness to resume their old relationship demonstrates his inability to restructure his atti-

tudes to allow for mutual understanding and affection. Head's distorted perception can see only one role for himself, when he thought he had lost that role, and his dominance over Nelson, he was in despair. Now that he has impressed Nelson with his "answer," he is ready to continue their running feud. To his credit, Nelson simply asks to go home, he changes the subject in the same way as he has done before to deflect an attack. And Head's attempted explanation of the mysteries of existence is just that.

Before we come to Head's climactic speech, we would be wise to equip ourselves with O'Connor's own attitude toward grace and redemption. Fortunately, she expressed her views quite forthrightly--our only problem will be in applying them. About redemption she said:

> Redemption is meaningless unless there is a cause for it in the actual life we live, and for the last few centuries there has been operating in our culture the secular belief that there is no such cause. 4

This is a warning against false-redemption, or the too easy granting or accepting of grace. She must have felt that this easy grace was a real problem, for she commented on it frequently. Her fear was that we would substitute compassion for moral judgement. In discussing the use of the grotesque she explained this further:

> I think what is meant by compassion is that the writer excuses all human weakness because human weakness is human...certainly when the grotesque is used in a legitamate way, the

> intellectual and moral judgements implicit in it will have the ascendency over feeling. 5

In her introduction to A Memoir of Mary Ann, she made a similar point about sentimental tenderness:

> If other ages felt less, they saw more, even though they saw with the blind, prophetical, unsentimental eye of acceptance, which is to say, of faith. In the abscence of this faith now, we govern by tenderness. It is a tenderness which, long since cut off from the person of Christ, is wrapped in theory. When tenderness is detatched from the source of tenderness, its logical outcome is terror. It ends in forced-labor camps and in the fumes of the gas chamber. 6

By granting too easy compassion to Head we will be guilty of such detatched tenderness. If Head is actually to receive redemption, he will have to earn it, will have to find a cause for it in his life. So far he appears to be no better off than before. He is still full of pride, anxious to dominate Nelson, and has not achieved a true recognition of his own nature.

O'Connor would have been the first to suggest that we approach his speech through the words themselves, through what we can see in the story. She once spoke to a class of story writers about letting moral judgements grow out of the action, rather than imposing them from outside:

> For the writer of fiction, everything has its testing point in the eye, and the eye is an organ that eventually involves the whole personality, and as much of the world as can be got into it. It involves judgement.

> Judgement is something that begins in the act of vision, and when it does not, or when it becomes separated from vision, then a confusion exists in the mind which transfers itself to the story. 7

The first thing The reader sees, as Head and Nelson step off their train in the clearing, is the moon. It is the same moon which distorted the reader's perception in the opening paragraph and which made Head's pride manifest in the transformation of his broken-down shack into a palace. If one is not suspicious of this "miraculous moonlight" by now, O'Connor reminds him of its power to distort:

> They went to the door of the train and stood ready to jump off if it did not stop; but it did, just as the moon, restored to its full splendor, sprang from a cloud and flooded the clearing with light. As they stepped off the sage grass was shivering gently in shades of silver and the clinkers under their feet glittered with a fresh black light. The tree-tops, fencing the junction like the protecting walls of a garden, were darker than the sky which was hung with gigantic white clouds illuminated like lanterns.
>
> Mr. Head stood very still and felt the action of mercy touch him again but this time he knew that there were no words in the world that could name it.

Perhaps Head can't name it, but the reader should be able to. Head has gotten a good look at himself in the harsh Atlanta sunlight (although not good enough to show him his true nature), but now he is back in his protected garden, safe in the "innocence" of his perception of himself. His final attempt to reinstate the old dominance over Nelson,

which he thinks he has accomplished, has reinflated his pride and his sense of security. This morning he felt himself to be the perfect moral missionary for Nelson, in his eyes he was nearly without sin and capable of offering spiritual instruction. Now he feels that perhaps that perception was wrong, but he is about to replace it with one which is just as proud and self-inflated. He started out as totally innocent of sin, now he will describe himself as totally contaminated by it.

His relief at being home and his joy over his "reunion" with Nelson make him think of mercy:

> He understood that it grew out of agony, which is not denied to any man and which is given in strange ways to children. He understood it was all a man could carry into death to give his Maker and he suddenly burned with shame that he had so little of it to take with him. He stood appalled, judging himself with the thoroughness of God, while the action of mercy covered his pride like a flame and consumed it. He had never thought of himself as a great sinner before but he saw now that his true depravity had been hidden from him lest it cause him despair.

There is an ecstatic quality to Head's thoughts which encourages us to believe them, but when we see through the emotion to the language itself we begin to suspect something is wrong. He claims that his pride has been consumed like a flame by the action of mercy, yet he thinks himself able to judge himself as if he were God. His shame that he has so little agony to take with him to his maker seems also the

product of pride, Head always wants more than his share (actually, if he really acknowledged his "true depravity" he'd have agony to spare!). His rationalization for the tardiness of his new "self-knowledge" puts the blame on God's shoulders instead of his own. Head seems to be up to his old tricks again, and so, for that matter, is O'Connor. She gives the reader no yardstick by which to judge Head's redemption but the reader's moral sense and the carefully constructed hyperbole of Head's "confession."

If Head's pride peeks through certain lines of the first part of his "acceptance of grace," it stands up in full view in the second half. Since he has already decided that he has received grace, Head feels confident in making a full confession. Unfortunately, he confesses for everybody's sins but his own:

> He realized he was forgiven for sins from the beginning of time, when he had conceived in his own heart the sin of Adam, until the present when he had denied poor Nelson. He saw that no sin was too monstrous for him to claim as his own, and since God loved in proportion as He forgave, he felt ready at that instant to enter Paradise.

The only one of his sins which he accepts is the unavoidable one, the denial of "poor Nelson." The last lines seem to describe his true depravity; he is taking out an insurance policy against Paradise, claiming bigger sins in order to get a better reward, he is ready to pay extravagant premiums now in order to find a higher pay-off in Heaven.

His invocation of Adam and his easy acceptance of original sin do double duty, as so many of O'Connor's details do. The reader has already been told that the clearing resembles a garden, in a minute the train will have "glided past them and disappeared like a frightened serpent into the woods." With all these hints it is easy to recall the first initiation experience in Eden. The train has tempted Head with knowledge, the same "knowledge of good and evil" which the original serpent offered to Eve. She and Adam accepted the offer, gained experience, and were shut out of the garden when they lost their innocence. Head has refused the serpent's offer, has turned down real knowledge to return to his "garden" with his false innocence intact. His pride has distorted his perception to the point where he can claim true knowledge without earning it, and can fool himself into believing that he can judge himself with the thoroughness of God, who surely would reach a different judgement of this shortsighted old con man. There can be no redemption where there is no repentence, and no amount of compassion or sentimental tenderness will alter that fact.

Head was unbearably self-righteous before his experience, but one can hardly imagine how pompous he will become now that he feels ready to enter Paradise with a paid-up policy. And "poor Nelson" is going to have to live with that self-righteousness. O'Connor saves her last word for the child, and, as we might expect, the last look at him is shrouded in ambiguity:

> Nelson, composing his expression under the shadow of his hat brim, watched him with a mixture of fatigue and suspicion, but as the train glided past them and disappeared like a frightened serpent into the woods, even his face lightened and he muttered, "I'm glad I've went once, but I'll never go back again!"

So Head has gotten his wish after all, the boy's last mutterance is a pathetic hope to remain in his protected garden. Yet there is that mixture of fatigue and suspicion with which he watches his grandfather's silent ecstacy, a hopeful sign since he will probably have to endure an onslaught of pompous self-righteousness from Head which will make their previous wars look like pillow fights. And he is still under the shadow of his hat, still not susceptible to the distortions of the moonlight. In fact, he seems to be in much the same condition as when we found him. He does have the experience of the denial, the true perception of Head which he found in the sunlight, and perhaps that will sustain him through the long wars ahead.

O'Connor has made some general remarks about her stories which may help in a final assessment of "The Artificial Nigger." Two of these, which deal with her use of grace, seem especially appropriate:

> I have found, in short, from reading my own writing, that my subject in fiction is the action of grace in territory held largely by the devil. 8

and:

> There is a moment of grace in most of the stories, or a moment where it is

offered, and it is usually rejected. 9

More directly, she has said about this particular story:

> Predictable, predetermined actions have a comic interest for me, it is the free act, the acceptance of grace particularly, that I always have my eye on as the thing that will make the story work...In "The Artificial Nigger" it is what the artificial nigger does to reunite Mr. Head and Nelson. None of these things can be predicted. They represent the workings of grace for the characters. 10

Without free will, her characters would be robots, and her complex plots would simply dissappear. Her own statement about "The Artificial Nigger" demonstrates this. At first glance it seems to contain no room for interpretation. But she says only that the "artificial nigger" reunites them--a simple fact, obvious from the text--and that this represents the "working of grace." She doesn't care to comment on whether or not the offer of grace is accepted, and that is where the problem arises.

The chief difficulty I have had in accepting the readings of the story by the critics mentioned in the introduction is that they won't allow her the freedom which these statements demand. Her subject is not grace, as those critics would insist, but the <u>offering</u> of grace "in territory held largely by the devil," an offer which "is usually rejected." This is the action of free will, man's birthright, but something which too many critics would deny her characters. Most often this means also denying her pervasive irony. Even critics like Sister

Bernetta, who are involved in an ironic reading of the story will suddenly insist that the irony stops before the climax begins. Carter Martin, on the other hand, exemplifies the critics who are so intent on O'Connor's religion that they either overlook or actually distort the irony, and often end up by failing to perceive any irony in the story at all. This sort of thing enables Martin to talk of Head's "epiphany" and "illumination"[11] and to describe the effect of the statue on them as "their common recognition of a symbol leveling them in their misunderstanding and guilt, revealing to them the oneness of men in guilt, ignorance, and the suffering of injustice."[12]

However, by concentrating on the irony which surrounds Head in every paragraph from first to last, a reader can follow O'Connor as she undermines and deflates Head's claims to redemption. The reader's awareness of irony cannot begin here and stop there, merely to satisfy doctrinal interpretations, he has to allow O'Connor to control his perceptions, and to demonstrate her meaning through comic reduction and ironic juxtaposition--and especially through dialogue and action. This is no more than any writer asks of his reader.

Because of this, the narrator's changing point of view may initially seem to be a flaw in the story. In the opening and concluding paragraphs, the narrator seems to agree with Head's perception of himself; indeed, the narrative description supports his self-deception. A reader is forced by

the very nature of fiction to rely on an omniscient narrator--at least until proven unreliable. The action which comes between the initial and final paragraphs does show us how unreliable the narrator has been, there is little question that we are seeing, and more importantly being told, the "truth" about Head. But this seems to reverse the usual order and so demands explanation.

By testing his original perception of Head, given through narrative description, with the reality of the breakfast quarrel a reader was able to re-evaluate his experience with Head and with the narrator. When he does so he finds that he has been deceived by the narrator into a false perception, and that he has even overlooked certain anomalies in order to rely on the narrator's description. It is not difficult to see, especially after a reading of the whole story, that this predicament is almost identical to Nelson's. In fact, an equation can be set up to state that the reader is in the same relation to the narrator as Nelson is to Head. The reader, like Nelson, is initially innocent, his perceptions are controlled and reality is interpreted for him by the narrator--just as Nelson's are by Head. And, just as Head leads Nelson astray, the reader is deceived by his guide as well. Just as the reader is forced to test the interpretations against action and dialogue, Nelson must also test his.

In this way O'Connor seems to be seeking to strengthen our experience of the story by insisting that we "learn" our

lessons in the same way Nelson learns his. Hopefully, the reader finishes with a more accurate perception of Head than Nelson seems to. By using her narrator to physically demonstrate the initiation process, O'Connor accomplishes at least two more things. She shows the reader the danger inherent in allowing another to controll your perceptions and, more importantly, the interpretation of what is perceived. She also demonstrates her belief in the reliability of concrete reality. In the miraculous moonlight, perception is distorted. But by dropping the unreliable narrator during the trip to Atlanta she allows the reader to correct his judgements by testing them against "things as they really are."

When she returns to her unreliable narrator for the conclusion, the reader should be able to recognize the change. Now that he is aware of Head's true sin, he should realize that only by accepting responsibility for his pride, and its attendent sins, can Head hope for real redemption. Since the only "actual" sin which Head accepts in his confession is the denial of Nelson, the reader should realize that the pride which has condemned Head is still controlling him. Armed as he now is with the perceptions gathered during the trip, the reader can evaluate this information for himself, can realize that Head's acceptance of grace is ironic and false since it is not accompanied by true repentence. The unreliable narrator is still at work, still trying to distort his perception, as Head is expected to continue to distort Nelson's now that

he's been "saved." But the reader should have learned too much about the deceiver to be taken in a second time.

If O'Connor had simply dramatized her meaning, we could have "learned" it easily enough; but by involving us in the process she was describing she is able to make us actually feel her meaning. The difference between learning and feeling is certainly one of the more important messages embodied in her use of the story's "niggers" and their combined artificiality. The reader who has been following that message and who is aware of the controlled use of the deceptive narrator should have little trouble interpreting Head's "redemption" correctly. Without such knowledge, the reader is at the mercy of Head and the "miraculous moonlight" and is trapped in a "Barnum and Bailey world/Just as phoney as it can be."

FOOTNOTES

INTRODUCTION

1 Carter W. Martin, The True Country--Themes in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor, (Vanderbilt University Press, 1968), p. 105.

2 Martin, p. 112.

3 Stanley Edgar Hyman, Flannery O'Connor, (University of Minnesota, 1966), p. 16.

4 Hyman, p. 16.

5 Sister M. Bernetta Quinn, "View from a Rock: The Fiction of Flannery O'Connor and J.F. Powers," Critique, 2 (1958) pp. 21-22.

6 Peter L. Hays,"Dante, Tobit, and 'The Artificial Nigger;'" Studies In Short Fiction, 5 (1963), p. 264.

7 Hays, p. 265.

8 Hays, p. 267.

FOOTNOTES

CHAPTER ONE

[1]Flannery O'Connor, "Some Aspects of the Grotesque In Southern Fiction," Mystery and Manners, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald, (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1969), p. 42. NOTE: all subsequent references to O'Connor's essays are from this collection. Future references will therefore include only the title of the essay and the page number.

[2]O'Connor, "Writing Short Stories," p. 91.

[3]O'Connor, "The Fiction Writer and His Country," pp. 33-4.

[4]O'Connor, "Some Aspects of the Grotesque," pp. 41-2.

[5]O'Connor, "The Nature and Aim of Fiction," p. 75.

[6]O'Connor, "The Artificial Nigger," Short Fiction: A Critical Collection, ed. James R. Frakes and the Isadore Traschen, (Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969), p. 111. NOTE: all references to the story are from this edition. Subsequent references will be included in the text as (p. ___). Page numbers will be supplied only for the first reference to a page.

FOOTNOTES

CHAPTER TWO

[1]O'Connor, "Some Aspects of the Grotesque," p. 42.

[2]O'Connor, "The Nature and Aim of Fiction," p. 70.

[3]O'Connor, "The Church and the Fiction Writer," pp. 145-6.

[4]Peter L. Hays, "Dante, Tobit, and 'The Artificial Nigger,'" p. 266.

FOOTNOTES

CHAPTER THREE

[1]Hays, p. 266.

[2]Hays, p. 267.

[3]One is reminded of the statues of little black jockies holding tethering rings which stood on so many Northern lawns until the civil rights movement gathered steam. In response to the temper of the times, the jockies were given a whitewashing but were left standing, their negroid features showing through their new white skin in confused but innocent miscegenation.

[4]O'Connor, "The Fiction Writer and His Country," p. 33.

[5]O'Connor, "Some Aspects of the Grotesque," p. 43.

[6]O'Connor, "Introduction to A Memoir of Mary Ann," p. 227.

[7]O'Connor, "Writing Short Stories," p. 91.

[8]O'Connor, "On Her Own Work," p. 109.

[9]Martin, p. 84.

[10]O'Connor, "On Her Own Work," p. 116.

[11]Martin, p. 105.

[12]Martin, p. 115.

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Vita

John E. Hahn was born of Mr. and Mrs. Robert F. Hahn on June 11, 1946, in Plainfield, New Jersey. He was greaduated from The Wardlaw Country Day School in 1965, and entered Franklin and Marshall College the same year. In June, 1969, he was graduated from Franklin and Marshall College with a B.A. degree in English. He came to Lehigh University as a graduate student and teaching assistant in September of that year. He expects to receive the M.A. degree in English in June, 1973.